

## Highland Amateur Cup Quarter-Final:

# Carloway 3 (1) Wick Groats 2 (1)

Jack Buchanan 26

Fraser Macleod 64

Own Goal (Gavin Sinclair) 68

Sandy Sutherland 39

Sean Stewart (pen) 78

Ref.: Gavin Dearie (Inverness).

At Morefield Park, Ullapool.

Saturday, 28.6.14.

David Beaton

Cameron "Tiger" Macarthur Gus Maciver Donald "D.I." MacIennan

Leigh Johnson Domhnall Mackay (capt.) Dan Crossley Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod Archie Macdonald

Fraser Macleod Jack Buchanan

Subs.: Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald (Fraser Macleod) 66; Phil Macleod (Leigh Johnson) 76

Subs. not used: Billy Anderson; Gordon Craigie; Kevin "Barra" Macneil;

Yellow cards: Archie Macdonald 20.

Graham McNab Sandy Sutherland

Mark Webster Greg Shearer Kyle Ross Stuart Ross

Sean Stewart Allan Sinclair Gavin Sinclair Andrew Cummings

Graeme Williamson.

Subs.: Craig Ross (Allan Sinclair) 72; David Hale (Graham McNab) 74.

Subs. not used: Gary Swanson; Derek Shearer; Graeme Miller.

Yellow card: Greg Shearer 21.

For the fourth time in their history, Carloway had earned an appearance in the open round of the Highland Amateur Cup, and another opportunity approached to emulate the glory once attained by Ness (1984, 1991, 1992, 1995), Point (1994), Lochs (2003, 2005), and Back (2004). It was as late as 2008 before the Blues reached the mainland in this competition, destroying Caithness side, Halkirk, 5-1 at Culbokie in Round 3, then losing 3-4 after extra-time to Castletown at the old King George V pitch in Fortrose, after enjoying an early 2-goal lead. Two years later they were to lose out 3-5 in Round 3 to Golspie Stafford, in a stormy game at Culbokie, but the following year, 2011, was to be the "almost" year, when they got so close, but not close enough, setting a bench-mark for future campaigns.

A stunning strike by Andrew "Tago" Maciver in the 75th minute at Leurbost had sent them to the new George V pitch on the Moray Firth to gain decisive revenge over their 2008 conquerors, 4-0, before Maryburgh provided the venue for, arguably, their finest hour in this competition: a 5-1 trouncing of much-fancied Kirkwall Rovers, which featured a second-half masterclass in finishing from Gordon "Tago" Macdonald, Dan Crossley, and Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald, the bullets all supplied by the Blues' own Xavi, Donnie MacPhail.

Morefield Park provided the setting for a first-ever Semi-Final but the reigning cup-holders, Avoch, proved at that stage to be a level beyond na Gormaich and, despite a thunderous equalizer from Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald early in the first-half, the Black Isle outfit prevailed 3-1, thanks to excellent chance-taking by Paul Brindle, who later moved up a rung to Clachnacuddin in the Highland League.

Last season, Carloway's so-called "*annus mirabilis*", fate threw the two sides together again, this time at Culbokie in R 3, to grind out a tense, fluctuating spectacle, in which the "*galacticos*" stormed back to equality from a 0-2 half-time deficit, edged much of the second half, then were confounded by Gary Urquhart's 89th minute header.

This season's campaign opened with the Blues clawing themselves back from a squeaky-bum

first-half at Lioncleit (1-2) versus Barra with three second-half strikes from Archie Macdonald and Fraser Macleod, before edging Athletic out 2-0 at Goathill, in the tightest of duels, decided by two early second-half goals: a controversial penalty, followed by the sweetest of strikes from Jack Buchanan. Round 3, of course, was the Lochinver/Culbokie fiasco, which meant passage to the Quarter-Final today without striking a blow, against the reigning Caithness League Champions and HAC holders.

HAC QFs are like healing balm to injured limbs. Suddenly everyone was fighting fit. Even much-missed Fraser Macleod arrived from Glasgow. No Seumas Macleod or Scott Macaulay, unfortunately, to round off the set, though. And Crieff's just down the road from Loch Broom!!!! Glasgow? A stone's throw! Who to leave out was the problem. The best defence on the islands picked itself; midfield had Domhnall Mackay and Murdo "Sqweg" Macleod on either side of L. & H. Footballer of the Year, Dan Crossley, with Leigh Johnson and Archie Macdonald on either flank; and a dream team of "Frazmac" and Jack Buchanan led the charge. A line-up Roman Abramovic would pay a billion for! Carloway could even afford to leave class *animateur*, Billy Anderson, in the bull-pen, alongside the best dead-ball specialist on Lewis, Gordon "Tago" Macdonald, plus Gordon Craigie, Kevin "Barra" MacNeil, Kenny "Dokus" Macdonald and Phil Macleod.

There were some clouds in this valley of joy, however - all in red clothing: the persistent creative nuisance, Sandy Sutherland, a mainland version of Bacach Murray Macleod, led the Caithness line; striker Graham MacNab beside him, whose two goals had eliminated John O' Groats in the previous round; and Andrew Cummings, whose presence at right half-back/wing was much regretted in the later stages of the game.

The long, early morning voyage from Stornoway to Ullapool is not the best preparation for a key Cup-tie. Neither is a three-hour coach drive from Wick for that matter. Passengers are more likely to feel their day is just ending, not beginning, yet a hard day's work lies ahead. Wick Groats immediately reminded Carloway of the job at hand, although it was the west Lewis side who surprised the Reds with an initial aggressive approach, featuring a high back-line, strong-running creative midfield, and bold movement and pace from Buchanan and Macleod. The pitch was unhelpful for a considered La Liga approach - cut but uncleared, soft, and heavy - especially in the south-eastern corner - but with Johnson and Macdonald blocking Cummings and Stewart on the wings, then driving forward; Mackay adamant in the centre and "Sqweg" and Crossley stifling and creating, early play was far from Beaton.

After an early "Frazmac" break on the right, a Cummings free-kick on the right side of the box, 22 metres out, was head-flicked on by Sutherland for Mark Webster in front of goal to clip hard inwards from 12 metres but Beaton held it square to his chest. An instant Blues' break saw Crossley glide rapidly on to a Macdonald lay-off from the left, progress down the left, then from 22 metres flick the ball over Allan Sinclair for Buchanan bursting into the right of the box, but his strong, low drive whizzed a metre wide of Wick's right-hand post.

The brutal conflict in the centre of the field, characterised as "*the quest for midfield supremacy*", led to a "Sqweg" free-kick in 12 minutes, just inside the Reds' half, played short and right to Crossley who accelerated effortlessly past two Wick men and into the right of the box. From 16 metres he unleashed a crashing low right-foot drive but Williamson got down brilliantly to his right to block it outwards, where Jack Buchanan, in classic Gerd Müller-style, thwacked it straight home from 14 metres without hesitation (**1-0**).

Four minutes later a Sinclair free-kick from the centre circle was headed clear, then met by Kyle Ross on the left edge of the box, but his powerful drive was rising as it passed beyond Beaton's left junction of bar and post. In 19 minutes Mackay played "Sqweg" forward into the Wick half on the right and his delicate, insightful flick between and over Cummings and Sinclair freed

Johnson to run clear on the right but his shot from a tight angle on the edge of the box, 18 metres from the bye-line, cleared the bar by at least a metre.

A perceptible swing in momentum was now apparent, with Wick Groats attempting to seize the initiative as na Gormaich stepped down a gear. In 22 minutes a MacNab free-kick midway within the Blues' half, towards the left, was laid off left to an unmarked Stewart, advancing, but 25 metres from goal, he sliced his effort well-wide. In 33 minutes a Macleod break on the right, followed by a low cross, 12 metres from the bye-line, just eluded the arriving Buchanan, and then, suddenly, a golden opportunity arrived for the Reds. Neat play on the right, moving into the Blues' half, led to Kyle Ross flicking the ball forward to Sutherland breaking into the right of the box, then a wall pass to Webster freeing the striker to move on and wham the ball low to Beaton's right, but the keeper was out like lightning to spread and miraculously touch the ball in the slightest to his right, just that inch enough to take it outside the far post.

However, it only delayed the equalizer by three minutes when another surge through the centre of the Carloway half saw Ross once again supply Sutherland veering leftwards into the Blues' box, shielding the ball expertly from Maciver and MacIennan to stab a right-foot daisy-cutter straight into Beaton's right-hand corner from 16 metres (1-1). The half ended square when a breaking ball outwards was sent zooming two metres over the Wick bar by Crossley from 20 metres on the right.

**Half-Time: Carloway 1 Wick Groats 1**

All to play for: Carloway had controlled the opening half of the first half; Wick edged the second. There had been no significant difference between the sides in territory or possession, but in the crucial area of chances created, the Blues had had more, though not necessarily better, opportunities. The main enemy for both was the draining pitch. The latter half of the second half was certainly going to be interesting. Immediately, that second half almost became a lot more interesting: Archie Macdonald won a crunching tackle over Ross on the right centre-line, then played the ball rapidly forward to Buchanan, lurking on the left. He dummied Cummings, turned back and inwards along the line of the box, then performed a characteristic whip-round and right-foot crack to send the ball thudding against the base of a surprised Williamson's post.

It was a warning call to the holders and in 59 minutes they responded: a surge through the midfield led to Ross feeding Sutherland, moving into the Blues' box. The perceived danger-man drew a cloud of defenders round him like a magnet and he tried to play the ball back, but the ball ping-ponged around a box as crowded as Sauchiehall Street on a Saturday night, before being booted low to the right where Cummings won it just inside the right corner of the box, then belted a smacker true and hard, high to Beaton's right. Incredibly, the keeper clawed it down, then grabbed it at the second attempt, under pressure.

Five minutes later, and once again, Themis's scales sank in na Gormaich's favour: a crunching assertion of power in midfield from Mackay saw him storm forward on the left and play it short to Buchanan, retreating to meet him, and also drawing the line out to follow. He turned sideways to his right, then sent a glorious right-footer that Platini would have been proud of curling over the defence, for "Frazmac" to touch past the unlucky keeper, racing to block, and as Macleod, Williamson, and Sinclair plunged backwards the striker touched the ball home into the right-hand corner from 6 metres (2-1).

As the Reds wobbled, Crossley set up another surge forward, supplying Buchanan, who tried to supply Macleod racing through on the right, but Cummings blocked, the ball rebounded to Buchanan, who then found himself on a clear run into goal between Sinclair and Cummings. His pile-driver from the edge of the box was perfect but Williamson was out like quicksilver to make himself big and pull off an amazing block AND hold, practically 12 metres from goal. Two

minutes later it looked as if it was all over. Once again a flighted ball from Crossley, moving into the Reds' half in the centre, found Johnson ghosting behind the line on the right. 10 metres from the line, he cut it square and low across goal. In the general melée in front of goal, the ball bounced off Wick defender Gavin Sinclair's leg, and a foot over the line, before the keeper could react and snatch it back. Not beautiful but they all count (**3-1**).

It wasn't all over. Not by a long shot. Wick Groats responded as you would expect Cup-holders to, and forced play for the rest of the game. However, it was difficult as every player on the field seemed exhausted and the pace rapidly approached that of a bounce game. An immediate break on the right from Cummings saw his low hard cross, square by the bye-line, brilliantly cut out by a trademark "D.I." block on Sutherland, the ball ending up in Ardersier. In 72 minutes the move was replicated, but Sutherland, at the near post, could not turn inwards, and his attempt shot well-wide of the near post. In 76 minutes another Cummings move down the right saw his low cross cleared out in front of goal by "Tiger", then Captain Cool arrived to nod the ball back over most of the players on the field into the arms of his keeper.

Then, suddenly, in 78 minutes, the afternoon really became tense: yet another Wick move, played swiftly into the left of the box after an untidy clearance and a loose ball in midfield, led to Webster seizing on the ball and veering left, only to be invited to examine the turf by Gus Maciver. Sean Stewart sent the ball crashing low to Beaton's right, and although the keeper somehow got his hand to it, the power of the strike took it home (**3-2**).

An interesting final 12 minutes unfolded. That's one way of putting it. Instantly, Crossley set off through the middle on a typical surging run, then pushed the ball forward to the breaking Buchanan, but his first-time right-foot drive shot like lightning over the right-hand side of the bar by a metre. An end-of-game template became evident: Carloway packed their area, patrolled the front edge of their box, allowed Cummings to break constantly on the right past a hamstring-impaired Uibhisteach, then crowded the ball out to a breaking Crossley to take off downfield like a Shanghai maglev, then supply the uncontrollable Buchanan. As the desperate Reds tried to gain a final clear sight of goal, in 86 minutes the ball was again cleared forward to Crossley to run and run, then supply Buchanan veering right into the box. He checked and turned back but a supporting "Dokus" arrived like a whirlwind to crack the loose ball. However, an alert Williamson had read it, and again held, nearly 12 metres out of his goal.

Then just when it seemed to be all over, another incredible Beaton save prevented extra-time. A final surge by Cummings down the right saw the wall pass returned to him just inside the right corner of the Blues' box by Ross, and he sent the sweetest of right-foot strikes curling away from Beaton's right. However, the keeper flung himself Yashin-like to his right to get his fingertips to the escaping ball and direct it just enough to go round his right-hand post.

**Full-Time: Carloway 3 Wick Groats 2**

Abair geama! No one on the terracing should complain they didn't receive the appropriate amount of afternoon entertainment. Better than any cinema matinée or afternoon shopping in the Edinburgh Woollen Mill. Carloway ran the first 25 minutes; Wick Groats the next 20. An early goal coloured the progress of the second half. The Blues perceptibly shrank back to protect - 2-1, ahead on a heavy pitch - who can blame them? Gifted players like Stewart, Cummings, and Sutherland were glad to fill the new-found space and to create more goalmouth situations, but, consequently, the Reds' push left openings for the pace of Crossley, Buchanan, Fraser Macleod, and "Dokus" at the back, and but for the brilliance of Graeme Williamson might have made the holders pay more dearly.

Yet the Reds can point the other way and say that if it had not been for a stunning display from David Beaton - his stops in the 33rd from Sandy Sutherland and in the dying seconds from Alan

Cummings were as good as any that Gilmar or Julio César might accomplish - the result might have been significantly different. But all of these games - in the Lewis and Harris League, Highland Amateur, and, no doubt, all of the other Highland amateur leagues, come down to the ratio of chances taken to chances created, and na Gormaich edged both, until the later stages of the game.

The commitment, the willingness to risk precious limbs, the desire to win, were admirable today from all participants, but, as in any other field of human activity, talent, creativity, and skill eventually tell. In a field of 20+ players, where no one was posted missing and everyone contributed as much as they could give, in terms of physical ability, stamina, and creativity, it's difficult to assess who made the crucial difference. Choice in itself suggests the others simply made up the numbers, which, of course, is untrue. The goalkeepers, Graeme Williamson and David Beaton, no doubt excelled; the colossus known as Gus Maciver in central defence also; his captain in front of him, Domhnall Mackay; Alan Cummings, who had a stunning last half-hour; two slippery front men, Jack Buchanan and Sandy Sutherland, vastly different in approach and style, but equally lethal; and class *animateur*, Dan Crossley, in the centre.

**Carloway Man of the Match: Dan Crossley.**

**Wick Groats Man of the Match: Sandy Sutherland.**